

THE WHALE AND THE GRASS-HOPPER ¹

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WHEN Standish McNeill started talking to his friend Felix O'Dowd as they walked at a leisurely pace towards the town of Castlegregory on a June morning, what he said was: "The world is a wonderful place when you come to think about it, an' Ireland is a wonderful place an' so is America, an' though there are lots of places like each other there's no place like Ballysantamalo. When there's not sunshine there, there's moonshine an' the handsomest women in the world live there, an' nowhere else except in Ireland or the churchyards could you find such decent people."

"Decency," said Felix, "when you're poor is extravagance, and bad example when you're rich."

"And why?" said Standish.

"Well," said Felix, "because the poor imitate the rich an' the rich give to the poor an' when the poor give to each other they have nothing of their own."

"That's communism you're talking," said Standish, "an' that always comes from education an' enlightenment. Sure if the poor weren't decent they'd be rich an' if the rich were decent they'd be poor an' if everyone had a conscience they'd be less millionaires."

"'T is a poor bird that can't pick for himself."

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"But suppose a bird had a broken wing an' could n't fly to where the pickings were?" said Felix.

"Well, then bring the pickings to him. That would be charity."

"But charity is decency and wisdom is holding your tongue when you don't know what you're talking about."

"If the people of Ballysantamalo are so decent, how is it that there are so many bachelors there? Do you think it right to have all the young women worrying their heads off reading trashy novels an' doin' all sorts of silly things like fixin' their hair in a way that was never intended by nature an' doin' so for years an' years an' having' nothin' in the end but the trouble of it all."

"Well, 't is hard blamin' the young men because every young lady you meet looks better to you than the last until you meet the next an' so you go on to another until you're so old that no one would marry you at all unless you had lots of money, a bad liver, an' a shaky heart."

"An old man without any sense, lots of money, a bad liver, an' a shaky heart can always get a young lady to marry him," said Felix, "though rheumatics, gout, an' a wooden leg are just as good in such a case."

"Every bit," said Standish, "but there's nothin' like a weak constitution, a cold climate, an' a tendency to pneumonia."

"Old men are quare," said Felix.

"They are," said Standish, "an' if they were all only half as wise as they think they are then they'd be only young fools in the world. I don't wonder a bit at the suffragettes. An' a time will come when we won't know men from women unless some one tells us so."

"Wisha, 't is my belief that there will be a great reaction some day, because women will never be able to stand the strain of doin' what they please without encountering opposition. When a man falls in love he falls into trouble likewise, an' when a woman is n't in trouble you may be sure that there's something wrong with her."

"Well," said Standish, "I think we will leave the women where the devil left St. Peter —"

"Where was that?" asked Felix.

"Alone," answered Standish.

"That would be all very fine if they stayed there," said Felix.

"Now," said Standish, "as I was talking of me travels in foreign parts, I want to tell you about the morning I walked along the beach at Ballysantamalo, an' a warm morning it was too. So I ses to meself, 'Standish McNeill,' ses I, 'what kind of a fool of a man are you? Why don't you take a swim for yourself?' So I did take a swim, an' I swam to the rocks where the seals goes to get their photographs taken an' while I was havin' a rest for meself I noticed a grasshopper sittin' a short distance away an,' pon me word, but he was the most sorrowful lookin' grasshopper I ever saw before or since. Then all of a sudden a monster whale comes up from the sea and lies down beside him an' ses: 'Well,' ses he, 'is that you? Who'd ever think of finding you here. Why, there's nothing strange under the sun but the ways of woman.'

"'Tis me that's here, then,' said the grasshopper. 'Me grandmother died last night an' she was n't insured either.'

"'The practice of negligence is the curse of mankind and the root of sorrow,' ses the whale. 'I suppose the poor old soul had her fill of days, an' sure we all must die, an' 't is cheaper to be dead than alive at any time. A man never knows that he's dead when he is dead an' he never knows he's alive until he's married.'

"'You're a great one to expatiate on things you know nothing about, like the barbers and the cobblers,' said the grasshopper. 'I only want to know if you're coming to the funeral to-morrow?'

"'I'm sorry I can't,' ses the whale. 'Me grandfather is getting married, for the tenth time, an' as I was in

China on the last few occasions I must pay me respects by being present at to-morrow's festivities,' ses he.

" 'I'm sorry you can't come,' ses the grasshopper, 'because you are heartily welcome an' you'd add prestige to the ceremony besides.'

" 'I know that,' ses the whale, 'but America does n't care much about ceremony.'

" 'Who told you that?' ses the grasshopper.

" 'Have n't I me eyesight, an' don't I read the newspapers,' ses the whale.

" 'You must n't read the society columns, then,' ses the grasshopper.

" 'Wisha, for the love of St. Crispin,' ses the whale, 'have they society columns in the American newspapers?'

" 'Indeed they have,' ses the grasshopper, 'and they oftentimes devote a few columns to other matters when the dressmakers don't be busy.'

" 'America is a strange country surely, a wonderful country, not to say a word about the length and breadth of it. I swam around it twice last week without stoppin,' to try an' reduce me weight, an' would you believe me that I was tired after the journey, but the change of air only added to me proportions.'

" 'That's too bad,' said the grasshopper.

" 'Are you an American?' said the whale.

" 'Of course I am,' ses the grasshopper. 'You don't think 't is the way I'd be born at sea an' no nationality at all like yourself. I'm proud of me country.'

" 'And why, might I ask?'

" 'Well don't we produce distinguished Irishmen? Don't we make Americans of the Europeans and Europeans of the Americans? Think of all the connoisseurs who would n't buy a work of art in their own country when they could go to Europe and pay ten times its value for the pot-boilers that does be turned out in the studios of Paris and London.'

" 'There's nothin' like home industry,' ses the whale, 'in a foreign country, I mean.'

“ ‘After all, who knows anything about a work of art but the artist? and very little he knows about it, either. A work of art is like a flower, it grows, it happens. That’s all. An’ unless you charge the devil’s own price for it, people will think you are cheating them.’

“ ‘Wisha, I suppose the best anyone can do is to take all you can get an’ if you want to be a philanthropist, give away what you don’t want,’ ses the grasshopper.

“ ‘All worth missing I catches,’ ses the whale, ‘an’ all worth catchin’ I misses, like the fisherwoman who missed the fish and caught a crab. How’s things in Europe? I did n’t see the papers this morning.’

“ ‘Europe is in a bad way,’ ses the grasshopper. ‘She was preaching civilization for centuries so that she might be prepared when war came to annihilate herself.’

“ ‘It looks that way to me,’ ses the whale. ‘Is there anything else worth while going on in the world?’

“ ‘There’s the Irish question,’ ses the grasshopper.

“ ‘Where’s that, Ireland is?’ ses the whale. ‘Is n’t that an island to the west of England?’

“ ‘No,’ ses the grasshopper, ‘but England is an island to the east of Ireland.’

“ ‘Wisha,’ ses the whale, ‘it gives me indigestion to hear people talking about Ireland. Sure, I nearly swallowed it up be mistake while I was on a holiday in the Atlantic last year, an’ I’m sorry now that I did n’t.’

“ ‘An’ I’m sorry that you did n’t try,’ ses the grasshopper. ‘Then you’d know something about indigestion. The less you have to say about Ireland the less you’ll have to be sorry for. Remember that me father came from Cork.’

“ ‘Can’t I say what I like?’ ses the whale.

“ ‘You can think what you like,’ ses the grasshopper, ‘but say what other people like if you want to be a good politician.’

“ ‘There’s nothin’ so much abused as politics,’ ses the whale.

“ ‘Except politicians,’ ses the grasshopper. ‘Only for

the Irish they'd be no one bothering about poetry and the drama to-day. Only for fools they'd be no wise people an' only for sprats, hake, and mackerel there 'ud be no whales an' a good job that would be, too.'

" 'What's that you're saying?' ses the whale very sharply.

" 'Don't have me to lose me temper with you,' ses the grasshopper.

" 'Wisha, bad luck to your impudence an' bad manners, you insignificant little spalpeen. How dare you insult your superiors?' ses the whale.

" 'Who's me superior?' ses the grasshopper. 'You, is it?'

" 'Yes, me then,' ses the whale.

" 'Another word from you,' ses the whale, 'an' I'll put you where Napoleon put the oysters.'

" 'Well,' ses the grasshopper, 'there's no doubt but vanity, ignorance and ambition are three wonderful things an' you have them all.'

" 'Neither you nor Napoleon, nor the Kaiser himself an' his hundred million men could do hurt or harm to me. You could have every soldier in the German Army, the French Army, an' the Salvation Army lookin' for me an' I'd put the comether on them all.'

" 'I can't stand this any longer,' ses the whale, an' then and there he hits the rock a whack of his tail an' when I went to look for the grasshopper, there he was sitting on the whale's nose as happy an' contented as if nothing happened. An' when he jumped back to the rock again he says: 'A little exercise when 't is tempered with discretion, never does any harm, but violent exertion is a very foolish thing if you value your health. But it is only people who have no sinse but think they have it all who make such errors.'

" 'If I could get a hold of you,' ses the whale, 'I'd knock some of the pride out of you.'

" 'That would be an ungentlemanly way of displaying your displeasure,' ses the grasshopper.

“‘I’d scorn,’ ses he, ‘to use violent means with you, or do you physical injury of any kind. All you want is self-control and a little education. You should know that quantity without quality is n’t as good as quality without quantity.’

“‘Sure ’t is I’m the fool to be wasting me time listening to the likes of you,’ ses the whale. ‘If any of me family saw me now, I’d never hear the end of it.’

“‘Indeed,’ ses the grasshopper, ‘no one belonging to me would ever recognize me ever again if they thought I was trying to make a whale behave himself. There would be some excuse for one of my attainments feeling proud. But as for you! —’

“‘An’ what in the name of nonsense can you do except give old guff out of you?’

“‘I have n’t time to tell you all,’ ses the grasshopper. ‘But to commence with, I can travel all over the world an’ have the use of trains, steamers, sailing ships and automobiles and will never be asked to pay a cent, an’ I can live on dry land all me life if I choose, while you can’t live under water, or over water, on land or on sea, and while all the king’s horses and all the king’s men could n’t catch me if they were trying till the crack of doom, you could be caught be a few poor, harmless sailors, who would n’t know a crow from a cormorant, and who’d sell your carcass to make oil for foolish wives to burn an’ write letters to other people’s husbands an’ fill the world with trouble.’

“‘An’ what about all the whalebone we supplies for ladies’ corsets an’ paper knives, and what about all the stories we make for the novelists an’ the moving pictures an’ —’

“‘We’re at the Sprig of Holly now,” said Felix. “Is it a pint of porter or a bottle you’ll have?”

“‘I’ll have a pint, I think,” said Standish.